

Media, Sexuality and Identity: Thoughts on the Role Text, Audience and Production Play in Cultural Discourse

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The intersection of media, sexuality and identity produces a rich academic debate, spanning policy, politics, effects, and sexual representation. As a result, scholars employ numerous theoretical and methodological perspectives when asking questions about how media may inform sexuality and identity. Arthurs (2004) observes that media are primary public forums for the regulation of sexuality across fictional and factual genres, and address concerns such as sexual morality in public and private spheres (e.g., Brown 2002; Jaker et al. 1992), changing patterns of family life (e.g., Coontz 1992; Kundanis 2003), and the limits of sexual representation in a deregulated media market (e.g., Becker 2004; Gross 1994; Kim et al. 2007). While scholars in many academic disciplines agree this topic is important, fragmentation and disciplinary narrowing of the study of sexuality and media has often prohibited engaging in academic dialogue about the importance of studying mediated sexualities as meaningful components of individual and collective identity formation.

The purpose of this special issue of *Sexuality & Culture* is for scholars to engage the topic of media and sexuality, with particular focus on the role media play in identity discourses of sex and sexuality. In his seminal work on encoding and decoding, Hall (1980) explains how linear models of media are flawed by the assumption that mediated messages end at passive audience reception. Instead, he argues that mediated “discourse must then be translated—transformed again—into social practice if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’ ... the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a *communicative* event” (pp. 166–167, emphasis original). Hall’s emphasis on communication turned critical scholarship toward interrogating media as a process of text, audience and production. In essence, media is created through a

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production process, driven by capitalist ideologies and industries selling a particular “product” through media. What is produced can be considered cultural text, an artifact worthy of analysis in its own right as representative of cultural discursive struggles. Finally, what audiences do with that particular text—how it becomes part of their daily lived realities—also influences what a mediated message means within a particular cultural moment. While these delineations of text, audience and production are somewhat superficial, they help organize our collective knowledge as scholars about media studies.

Given the complex interplay between text, audience and production, it is no wonder that scholars studying sex and sexuality find mediated messages rich sites for analysis. However, they struggle with similar complexity in terms of what “counts” as sexuality scholarship. Scholarship on sexuality can encompass sexual behavior, cultural attitudes about sex and sexuality, and identity issues related to sexuality. How media communicate about sex and sexuality is vitally important because “representation in the mediated ‘reality’ of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or power bases” (Gross 1994, p. 143). The types of sex and sexuality represented in media serve as cultural commentary about relational expectations, sexual health/reproduction, and public law/politics.

The articles in this issue deal largely with sexual identity, but also comment on our cultural expectations and attitudes about sex and sexuality. The essays also align with Hall’s trajectory, commenting specifically on the role that text, audience and production play in media discourse. Three essays interrogate the role specific texts have in constructing sexual identity for a particular group of people. Burr-Miller and Aoki (2013) explore the documentary *Guys and Dolls*, a text chronicling the lives of men with “Real Dolls”—life-sized, anatomically correct female dolls with whom they develop significant (sometimes sexual) relationships. The authors argue the men in the documentary are “be-coming out,” utilizing narrative storytelling as a way to articulate sexual identity that seems non-normative. While the men in the documentary identify as heterosexual, the relationships they create with their dolls challenge traditional cultural understandings of what constitutes “healthy” sexuality. As such, *Guys and Dolls* creates “a voyeuristic hetero-spectacle” where the camera becomes a confessional access point designed to encourage viewers to consume these stories heteronormatively. In a sense, despite the heterosexual identities held by the men, cultural demarcation of their deviation from traditional heterosexual norms others their sexuality. The process of othering is also examined by Glenn and Spieldenner’s (2013) textual analysis of mediated representations of Black men on the down-low. The authors find these narratives center more on a heterosexual female partner, illustrating a pattern of “love and trouble” relationships where Black men cannot be trusted. Second, these representations undermine the economic success of the Black men, implying that Black men with economic success are more likely to be part of the down-low culture, securing access to cultural power through sexual acts with white men. As a result, these representations present “subtler versions of Black male sexual stereotypes” such as hyper-sexuality, criminal behavior, and lack of control. Finally, Hackl et al. (2013) examine media discourse of marriage equality, finding that bisexual individuals in marital

relationships are largely absent from the discussion of marriage and identity politics. This issue of “bi-invisibility” within the marriage equality movement is central to framing long-term sexual relationships in media discourse. These essays taken together illustrate the complex ways media texts represent, misrepresent, or strategically fail to represent non-normative sexual identities.

There are also three essays in this issue interrogating audience reception as critical for understanding sexual identity. Stern (2013) provides an innovative combination of autoethnography and feminist criticism, analyzing her own heteronormative media choices and their impact on her sexual identity formation. Her account skillfully illustrates how our personal consumption of media representations has (unintended) consequences for sexual identity development. In fact, the types of sexual relationships available for consumption in media impacts broader audience discourses about sexuality. In Meyer and Wood’s (2013) piece, they asked emerging adult viewers of the television series *Glee* to articulate their understanding of sexual identity as represented within the series. Overwhelmingly, the (largely heterosexual) respondents commented on the importance of representing non-heterosexual identities in the series to non-heterosexual youth; however, they dismissed (or did not interrogate) heterosexual representations as important to their own sexual identity development. The authors then argue that a similar discourse occurs in academic work on media and sexuality—whereby labeling a piece as a “sexuality” study often implies the work must be non-heterosexual in scope. Taken together, these two pieces have important implications, as sex and sexuality also encompass heterosexuality—yet audiences may not connect media representation to the formation of a heterosexual identity. Building on this, Watson and McKee (2013) tackle another often ignored facet of sexual identity development—masturbation. By interviewing youth about their experiences with media, they found that media were often young people’s sole source of information about masturbation. In fact, their focus group data illustrate that young people were much more comfortable speaking about safe sex and procreation than talking about masturbation. The authors juxtapose their focus group findings with media representations of masturbation mentioned by their participants, noting that most of these representations are comedic in nature, encouraging young people to place a high stigma and taboo on masturbation as a form of sexual pleasure.

The final link in the chain involves media production. Production is traditionally difficult to study, as access to studios, individuals and technologies that produce media content is often limited. With the advent of the Internet, however, technologies of production are more readily available to the everyday public than ever before. In fact, individuals frequently employ these technologies as a means of interacting with cultural discourses about sexuality as perpetuated by media. In this vein, Meyer (2013) examines a specific sub-set of fans of the television series *Smallville*, who participate in the CLex slash community. These fans actively interpret the relationship between Clark Kent and Lex Luthor on *Smallville* as homoerotic and/or homosexual in nature. Many participants in the study felt this relational dynamic was not part of the intended production of *Smallville*, and that their ability to decode this particular subtext made them more educated readers than average viewers. However, in the case of *Smallville*, commentaries from writers and

producers on DVDs, in media interviews, and even some scripted passages in the series, indicated that they were aware, and even targeting, this sub-set of fans. This led many participants to question whether or not their subversive practice of writing slash fan fiction was actually “subversive” if it had been a planned interpretation by the series creators. The question here is who “owns” the identity politics vested in a particular media message—the producers, the consumers, or both? In Liu’s (2013) essay, this question is taken out of the context of a particular media text to a larger cultural discourse of sexual identity. Given the cultural stigma against non-heterosexual identities in China, coupled with societal and familial pressures to conform to traditional heterosexual pairings, Liu examines websites where gay and lesbian Chinese individuals post personal ads in the hopes of forming a marriage of convenience, relationships that are largely asexual but fulfill familial and societal expectations. Since dating sites featuring personal ads are often presented as heterosexual spaces, the gay and lesbian Chinese utilizing personal ads on the Internet are actively using the means of production available to them in order to subvert societal hegemonic norms.

The essays featured in this issue present important commentaries on sexual identity, media representation, production and consumption. Together, they offer insightful directions for research interrogating the link between media, sexuality and identity. As with any scholastic endeavor, I could not have compiled this collection if not for the assistance of my review board. I would personally like to thank Tony Adams, Michael Arrington, Linda Baughman, Ronald Becker, Jeffery Bennett, Keith Berry, Justin Boren, Cheryl Chambers, James Chesebro, Jennifer Dunn, Jamie Landau, Jimmie Manning, Mark Orbe, Kyra Pearson, Alice Veksler, Isaac West, Robert Westerflehaus, and Stephanie Young for serving in this important capacity. I would also like to express my sincerest thanks to Roberto Refinetti, editor-in-chief at *Sexuality & Culture*, and the editorial staff at Springer for supporting this special issue through all stages of its progress. In all, I hope you find this series of essays as engaging and thoughtful as I do. It is my sincerest hope that they will pave new avenues for scholarship on media and sexuality.

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